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Human Trafficking in Jordan Condemned By Steelworkers and National Labor Committee

Jordan's U.S. Ambassador Agrees to Investigate Inhumane Abuses in Sweatshops

Washington, D.C. – The United Steelworkers (USW) and the National Labor Committee (NLC) today jointly denounced human trafficking at apparel sweatshops in Jordan during a two-hour meeting with that country's ambassador to the United States at the Steelworkers headquarters in Washington, D.C.

Foreign guest workers from Bangladesh complained to the NLC, an advocacy group supported by the USW, that they were being forced into the equivalent of modern-day slavery by labor contractors in Jordan, abuses that Gerard said are being enabled by a free-trade agreement with the United States.

In one instance, the NLC revealed, a female Bangladeshi worker hung herself in a factory after being raped by her manager.

Apparel manufacturing is booming in Jordan, helped by the privileged trade position given Jordan by the United States as a result of a free trade agreement signed with Washington in 2001, and because of Jordan's 1994 peace accord with Israel.

"What the National Labor Committee's investigation has done," said USW President Leo W. Gerard, "is reveal the dark underbelly of our unregulated trade policies. Without strong labor rights and environmental standards in core trade agreements, guest workers everywhere can be abused – even treated as slaves as they have been by labor contractors in Jordan."

In the meeting, Jordanian Ambassador, Karim Kwar, agreed to a sweeping investigation involving his country's ministries of Labor, Industry and Trade, Health and Interior. He asked the union and the NLC for recommendations on dealing with workers who have been abused and on how to prevent future abuse. Gerard said those recommendations will be delivered within a few days.

Gerard said he was impressed by how quickly the Jordanian had agreed to a meeting and by the ambassador's willingness to address the issue, commenting that he had begun the meeting by thanking Kernaghan for exposing the abuses. "It gives us some hope," he said, "that these heinous actions can be redressed."

He said that, according to the ambassador, the abuses had occurred "under the government's radar screen," an assessment shared by Kernaghan.

Apparel exports from Jordan have risen from \$52 million in 2000 to \$1.2 billion last year and are sold by some of the largest retailers in the United States, including Kohl's, L.L. Bean, Target and Wal-Mart, among others.

“It’s huge,” said Charles Kernaghan, the NLC’s executive director. “And the big winner is China, which is supplying 63 percent of the textiles to the operations in Jordan, while thousands of U.S. textile workers are losing their jobs.”

As detailed by a May 3 report in the New York Times, the NLC uncovered substandard conditions in more than 25 of the roughly 100 garment factories now doing business in Jordan.

A 10-month investigation, triggered by an anonymous note that was faxed to the NLC’s New York office, uncovered foreign guest workers in Jordan who detailed 20-hour work days, not being paid for months, and being struck and even jailed by supervisors when they complained.

“They are treated like slaves,” Kernaghan said. Citing numerous cases in which workers had been required to work 40 hours continuously, Kernaghan said, “Instead of a 40-hour work week, these workers have a 40-hour shift.”

The most serious allegation involves human trafficking. Jordanian guest workers from Bangladesh paid a fee of \$1,000 to \$3,000 to work in Jordan. When the guest workers arrived in Jordan, Kernaghan said their passports were confiscated, an illegal move that tied them to jobs that often paid less than the workers were promised and less than Jordan’s minimum wage.